

Quality control with respect to interpreting – the agent's perspective

I am not sure if there is anything more I can add being the last speaker today and after all, we are all talking about language professionals: translators and interpreters.

Three little stories:

During the Capitals of Wines one of the interpreters during tea mingled with the delegates and gave her personal opinion.

At the Inauguration of the Pan African Parliament in 2004, we had an Arabic interpreter who translated Pan African Parliament as Frying Pan African Parliament.

During the SANGOCO Poverty Hearings in 1997 an isiZulu interpreter called HIV/Aids the dirty disease – from the booth.

Mistakes happen and can't always be avoided – all three mistakes happened to me as an agent and are my responsibility despite any contracts you sign with clients and interpreters.

What makes an interpreter? What makes an agent?

I do still believe, after 16 years in the industry, that simultaneous interpreting is a gift. You can either do it or you can't do it – no five year degree at any university is going to teach it to you unless you have got what it takes: a fell for languages, an interest in everything and nothing, curiosity and a high concentration span.

Universities can only equip you with rules and methods to provide a continuous high quality of interpretation services, to provide you with the practice in different fields of terminology, breathing techniques and preparation techniques.

But in the end it is the general knowledge and the curiosity of the interpreter in any given subject that makes him/her perform a good job.

The CV of an interpreter or language practitioner is only a small measure to decide upon his or her quality of interpretation – particular for newcomers. There is more to it than a well-written CV.

If we would only give interpreters with excellent references and an international track record the chance to work at conferences, we will cut out any newcomers. And let me tell you, we do need young and upcoming interpreters in the industry otherwise our industry is becoming extinct.

It is certainly beneficial if an interpreter belongs to SATI, AIIC or any other organisation but we do have to know that these organisations are voluntary organisations and we have made the experience that they do have their shortfalls. Their membership is also regulated by friendships and connections.

There are easier and more difficult conferences and there is no rule that says that we can't give newcomers a chance in one of the conferences using plain language and more general terminology.

An interview with the interpreter on the telephone or face to face will give an experienced agent a good idea if the chance can be taken and he or she can be send off to a booth.

Already in an interview one can assess
Sense consistency with the original message
Logical cohesion of utterance
Correct grammatical usage
Listening skills
Fluency of language
Native accent
Pleasant voice
Ethics

It is about comprehension of language and managing different accents in the heard language – we do have the advantage in South Africa that most interpretation happens from English into one of the other official languages and into foreign languages.

However, if I get the feeling that a potential interpreter does not understand or comprehend what I am saying, I get a little nervous and will let somebody else communicate with him or her.

Now that a decision has been taken to send the new person into the booth, the interpreter and the agent have to ensure that all is done to guarantee quality:

The agent has to ensure that the interpreter can and WILL prepare. We can provide the professionals with documents, if we don't get the necessary documents from our clients, we need to check our own databases for "old" glossaries and the Internet and advise the language practitioners accordingly. This must be done in good time.

Newcomers and those interpreters who are known not to prepare well also have to provide me with their glossaries prior and after the conference.

The agent has to educate the client and instruct the speakers: one language needs to be spoken, two interpreters per language combination is the absolute minimum, relay takes additional time, etc.

The equipment: don't expect any interpreter to do his or her work without the necessary equipment in good working condition and ongoing technical support or under unsatisfying conditions: at least two interpreter per booth, enough light, bottled water, etc.

Newcomers need to go into a booth with one of the "old" interpreters and need to be made aware of yet another way of quality control.

The questions to ask are:

1. Comprehension/understanding of the topic?
2. Preparation work done?
3. Can the other booths take the relay?

Many newcomers are suggested by the oldies and all our oldies are happy to report back on the quality of their work. Yet again, it is not the only measure but it is a measure and personal relationships have to be taken into consideration once again.

As an agent: listen to the interpreters. How many ahs and ohs are in his/her sentences? How long are the silences? Does he or she speak in complete sentences? How long after the floor language delegates do the delegates with headphones laugh?

Give feedback after the conference. Speak to client and pass comments, complements and criticism on.

Pay at the agreed time. It is not the interpreter's responsibility to get the money from the client or when you get the money from the client.

Have a professional relationship with the language practitioners.